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SUBJECT: GHA Part 3: The May Fourth Movement and
Contemporary Chinese Activism

REF: A) Guangzhou 20890 B) Guangzhou 18191

11. (U) Classified by Acting Consul General William Martin.
Reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

12. (C) A recent meeting with two pro-democracy activists revealed significant aspects of contemporary Chinese activism. These activists, involved with the magazine "Citizen" and the Guangdong Humanistic Association, are disillusioned with the current state of politics in China. They claim to rely on the "common" people to encourage political change, while at the same time striving to teach these people how to be modern citizens. They also seek to awaken the Chinese people out of their "numb" state. Their brand of protest is clearly rooted in the activist tradition of twentieth-century China. The two men's backgrounds are very different -- one is a long-time activist, the other comes from within the Communist Party political system -- and it is significant that they now work together towards a common goal. End Summary.

13. (C) On June 29, Hao Yuanwen, the publisher of the magazine "Citizen" ("Shimin") and the president of the Guangdong Humanistic Association (GHA), and his advisor, Yao Yuanguang, outlined their motivation for establishing China's first and only privately funded magazine (refs A and B). Though these activists' specific pro-democracy activities are based on the current political situation in China, they nevertheless work within a historical context of one hundred years of Chinese activism. This third cable, in a series of cables on the GHA, examines the goals and compromises of two participants in contemporary Chinese pro-democracy activism. By studying these men's ideals and inspirations, we may add to our understanding of what comprises contemporary Chinese pro-democracy activism.

Focus on Intellectuals and Print Media - The May Fourth
Movement as Inspiration

14. (C) Hao and Yao explained that the primary historical inspiration for their magazine is the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and surrounding years, in particular the magazine "New Youth," which was published from 1915 to 1926. During that time a culture of print media evolved, in which intellectuals shared their ideas through newsletters and magazines. It was during this period that the link between intellectuals, print media, and political change was established in China. "New Youth," founded by Chen Duxiu and the most popular of many magazines supporting democracy,

was a key element of the ferment that accompanied the May Fourth Movement. "New Youth" demanded political change and self-determination for the newly realized Chinese nation. By claiming that "New Youth" is the primary inspiration for "Citizen," Hao and Yao demonstrate a clear link between present and past activism.

15. (C) Many of the political concepts that Hao and Yao expressed echo similar notions that existed during the May Fourth period. First, they claimed to rely on the Chinese people for political change, yet at the same time they sought to educate the people on how to behave like modern citizens. Hao and Yao said they regard their efforts, and the purpose of "Citizen," as part of a "supplementary" lesson, so that the Chinese people can catch up. Intellectuals during May Fourth also regarded themselves as teachers of the people. Second, in a previous meeting they claimed their mission is to awaken the Chinese people from their "numb" state (ref B), just as earlier Chinese activists did. In contemporary China, this numb state means a focus on selfish desires for money in the new capitalist system, complacency with the current government, and the "crony capitalism" of the CCP. In early twentieth century China, it meant an inability to see that China must modernize and enter the world of nation-states, instead of remaining mired in its feudal society. (Lu Xun's stories "The Diary of a Madman" and "The True Story of Ah Q," well known among Chinese intellectuals, are two of the most famous examples of this kind of May Fourth sentiment.) The belief that China must awaken persists in the Chinese culture of protest. Indeed, the lingering influence of the May Fourth Movement reveals itself not in these activists' specific goals and practices, but in their spirit of change, and their impatience with the apparent inability of the Chinese political system to move past its feudal roots.

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Politics Makes for Strange Bedfellows

16. (C) Hao and Yao come from very different political backgrounds, yet they have come together, in what appears to be a warm and respectful relationship, to work towards the common goal of democracy in China. Professionally, Hao is very successful: he is a retired military official with 37 years of government service and 33 years of CCP membership. He is a successful businessman, manages a separate office building, and drives a nice car with government plates. Personally, he maintains many high-level contacts in the military and Guangdong government (he believes his magazine can exist partly due to his relationship (guanxi) with these contacts). Hao has worked within the established political system for his entire career, and could have chosen a comfortable life as a retired senior member of the CCP. Instead, due to disillusionment with the system, he is willing to risk change and reform.

17. (C) In contrast, Yao, an international relations professor at South China Normal University, has been involved with pro-democracy protest in China for a number of years. At a previous meeting he said he was involved in the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989, and is a friend of Wang Dan, now in exile in the United States. Dissent has long been a part of Yao's career, as opposed to Hao, who has worked within the system. Yet these two men now appear to have a warm relationship, and both rely on the other for certain needs. Hao, for example, seems respectful of Yao's intellectual credentials, his familiarity with the culture of protest in China, and his command of English. And Yao constantly reminded Congenoffs that Hao is a great contributor to the pro-democracy effort in China, and "Citizen" would not be possible without his support.

Comment

18. (C) Hao and Yao, like many Chinese intellectuals throughout the twentieth century, spend a good deal of time debating abstract political theories and seeking ideal theoretical methods to undertake political change. Their focus on educating "the people," while commendable, will be difficult to achieve if "Citizen" continues to circulate only among a select group of educated Chinese. Without a practical plan for change, their effort may stall. The addition of people like Hao, with his CCP experience, could be a positive step toward keeping the pro-democracy effort from being short lived. However, despite what Hao brings to the table, both Hao and Yao appear to lack practical media business experience, and the GHA may quickly run out of funds. Nevertheless, that these two men, despite their different backgrounds, are able to work together shows the possibility for flexibility within the Chinese pro-democracy movement. Indeed, the union of activists and insiders may yield the best chance for Chinese political reform. Hao and Yao's friendship is a sign that this kind of union is possible. End comment.

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